Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 69

Girls’ Camp

1

Amy was sitting on her front steps when we pulled up. It was early evening, just getting dark, and all up and down our street, lights were on in the houses, people out walking their dogs or children. Someone a few streets over was barbecuing, the smell mingling in the air with cut grass and recent rain. I got out of the car and put my bag on the front walk, looking across the street at Amy’s house, the only light coming from her kitchen, and spilling out into the empty carport. She lifted one hand and waved at me from the stoop. 'Mom, I’m going to Amy’s,' I

said. 'Fine.' I still was not forgiven for this, not yet.

Nonetheless, it was late, she was tired, and those days, we had to pick our battles. I knew the way across the street and up Scarlet’s walk by heart; I could have done it with every sense lost. The dip in the street halfway across the two prickly bushes on either end of her walk that left tiny scratches on your skin when you brushed against them. It was eighteen steps from the beginning of the walk to the front stoop; we had measured it when we were in sixth grade and obsessed with facts and details. We had spent months calculating distances and

counting steps, trying to organize the world into manageable bits and pieces. Now I just walk toward her in the half-darkness, aware only of the sound of my footfalls and the air conditioner humming softly under the side window.

'Hey,' I said, and she scooted over to make room for me.

2

'How’s it going?’ It seemed like the stupidest thing to ask once I had said it, but there were not any right words. I looked over at her as she sat beside me, barefoot, her hair pulled away from her face in a loose ponytail. She had been

crying. I was not used to seeing her this way. 'Amy? I said, there in the dark, and as she turned to me. I saw her face was streaked with tears. For a minute, I did not know what to do. I thought again of that picture tucked in her mirror, of her and Jack just weeks ago, the water so bright and shiny behind them. And I thought of what she had done all the millions of times I had cried to her, collapsing at even the slightest wounding of my heart or pride. Amy had always been the stronger, the livelier, the braver. So, l reached over and pulled her to me, wrapping my arms around her, and held my best friend close, returning so many

favors all at once. We sat there for a long time, Amy, and me, with her house looming over us and mine right across the street staring back with its bright windows. It was the end of summer; it was the end of a lot of things. I sat there with her, feeling her shoulders shake under my hands. I had no idea what to do or what came next. All I knew was that she needed me and I was here. And for now, that was about the best we could do.

3

The girl who punched out Lisa, the meanest, most fiendish of the pink-bike girls that the first summer she

moved in, on a day when they surrounded us and tried to make us cry. The girl who kept a house, and her mother, up and running since she was five, now playing mother to a thirty-five-year-old kid.

The girl who had kept the world from swallowing me whole, or so I had always believed. Amy was a redhead, but not in an orangey, carrot-top kind of way. Her color was more auburn, deep, and red mixed with browns that made her green eyes seem almost luminous. Her skin was pale, with masses of freckles for the first few years I knew her; as we grew older, they faded into a sprinkling across her nose, as if they had been scattered

there by hand. She was an inch and threequarters shorter than me, her feet a size larger, and she had a scar on her stomach that looked like a mouth smiling from when she had gotten her appendix out. She was beautiful in all the comatose, accidental ways that I was not, and I was jealous more than I would ever have admitted. I was forever known as 'Amy’s friend Hallie.' But I did not mind. Without her, I knew I would be spending time together in the bus parking lot with the nerds and Beth Vaughn. That was, I was sure, the destiny in store for me until the day Amy looked up from behind those white sunglasses and made a spot for me

next to her for the rest of my life. To me, Amy was foreign and exotic. But she had said she would have given anything for my long hair and tan in summer, for my thick eyelashes and eyebrows. Not to mention my father, my conventional family, away from Beth with her whims and fancies.

4

It was an even trade, our envy of each other; it made everything fair. We always believed we lived perfectly parallel lives. We went through the same phases at the same time; we both liked gory movies and sappy stuff, and we knew

every word to every song on the old musical soundtracks my parents had. Amy was more confident, able to make friends fast, where I was shy and quiet, hanging back from the crowd. And I was grateful. Because life is an ugly, awful place to not have a best friend. When I pictured myself, it was always like just an outline in a coloring book, with the inside not yet completed. Al the standard features were there. But the colors, the zigzags, and plaids, the bits and pieces that made up me, Hallie, were not yet in place. Amy's lively reds and golds helped some, but I was still waiting. He went back to his

friends from Lakeview, like his best friend Beth.

Sometimes we would see them walking down our street, between our two houses, in the middle of the night, smoking cigarettes and laughing. They were different, and they fascinated us. By leaving the popular crowd, Jack & Beth became a conundrum. No one was sure where he fit in, and he was friendly with everyone, sort of the great equalizer of our high school. He was famous for his pranks on substitute teachers and was always asking to borrow a dollar in exchange for a delightful story; he told outlandish tales, half-true at best, but

they were so funny you got your dollars' worth. The one I remember he told me had to do with psychotic Girl Scouts who were stalking him. I did not believe him, but I gave him two dollars and skipped lunch that day. It was worth it. Each of us had our own story about Jack, something he had done, said, or passed down. More than anything, it was the things he did not do that made Jack Beth so intriguing; he seemed so far from the rest of us and yet implicitly he belonged to everyone. At the end of every school year, there was the annual slideshow, full of candid shots that had not made the yearbook. We all piled into the auditorium and watched as our

classmates’ faces filled the huge screen, everyone cheering for their friends and booing people they did not like. There was only one picture of Jack Beth, but it was a good one: he was sitting on the wall by himself, wearing this black baseball hat he always wore, laughing at something out of the frame, something we could not see. The grass was so green behind him and above that a clear stretch of blue sky. When the slide came up, the entire crowd in that auditorium cheered, clapping, and hooting and craning their necks to look for Jack, who was sitting up on the balcony with Beth Faulkner, looking embarrassed.

But that was what he was to us, always: the one thing that we all had in common. The funeral was the next day, Thursday. She needs some rest, or she’s just going to crash.'

5

For most of the high school, we had not known Jack Beth that well, even though we had grown up in the same neighborhood. He had gone away the summer after middle school to California and returned transformed: tan, taller, and suddenly gorgeous. He was immediately the boy to date. He went out with Beth Tabor for about fifteen minutes, then Beth

Gunderson, the head cheerleader, for a few months. But he never seemed to fit in with that crowd of soccer-team captains and varsity jackets. I went across the street to Amy’s after breakfast, in bare feet and cutoffs, carrying two black dresses I could not decide between. I had only been to a funeral before, my grandfathers in Buffalo, and I had been so little someone had dressed me. This was different. 'Come in,' I heard Beth call out before I even had a chance to knock at the side door. She was sitting at the kitchen table, coffee cup in front of her, flipping through Vogue. 'Hey,' I said to her as she smiled at me. 'Is she awake?'

'Practically all night,' she said quietly, turning the page and taking a sip of coffee. 'She was on the couch when I got up. I had to keep from smiling. These were the same words I heard from Amy about Beth regularly; for as long as I had known them their roles had been reversed. When Martian had been depressed and heavily drinking a few years back, it was Amy who came knocking at our front door in her nightgown at two am. because she had found Beth passed out cold halfway up the front walk, her cheek imprinted with the ripples and cracks in the concrete. My father carried Beth into the house while

my mother tried her best therapy shtick on Amy, who said nothing and curled up in the chair beside Beth’s bed, watching over her until morning. My father called Amy 'earnest'; my mother said she was 'in rejection.' 'Hey.' I looked over to see Amy standing in the doorway in a red shirt and cutoff long underwear, her hair still messed up from sleeping. She nodded at the dresses in my hand. 'Which one you going to wear?' 'I don’t know,' I said. She came closer, taking them from my hands, then held each up against me, squinting. 'The short one,' she said quietly, laying the other on the counter next to the fruit bowl. 'The one with the scoop neck

always makes you look like you’re twelve.'

I looked down at the scoop-necked dress, trying to remember where I had worn it before. It was always Amy who kept track of such things: dates, memories, lessons learned. I forgot everything, barely able to keep my head from one week to the next. But Amy knew it all, from what she was wearing when she got her first kiss to the name of the sister of the boy, I had met at the beach the summer before; she was our oracle, our common memory.

6

She opened the fridge and took out the milk, then crossed the room with

a box of Rice Krispies under her arm, grabbing a bowl from the open dishwasher on her way. She sat at the head of the table, with Beth to her left, and I took my seat on the right. Even in their tiny family, with me as an honorary member, there were traditions. Amy poured herself some cereal, adding sugar from the bowl between us. 'Do you want some?' 'No,' I said. 'I ate already.' My mother had made me French toast and eggs, after spending most of the early morning gossiping over the back fence with her best friend, Beth, who was known for her amazing azaleas and her mouth, the latter of which I had heard all

morning through my window. Mrs. Riley had known Beth well from CCD and had already been over with a chicken casserole to relay her regrets. Mrs. Trilby had also seen me and Jack and Amy more than once walking home from work together, and late one night she had even caught a glimpse of Amy and Jack kissing under a streetlight. He was a sweet boy; she had said in her nasal voice. He mowed their lawn after Arthur's coronary and always got her the best bananas at Milton's, even if he had to sneak some from the back. A nice boy. So, my mother came inside newly informed and sympathetic and made me a huge

breakfast that I picked at while she sat across the table, coffee mug in hand, smiling as if waiting for me to say something. As if all it took was Jack -Beth mowing a lawn, or finding the perfect banana, to make him worth morning. 'So, what time’s the service?' Beth asked me, picking up her Marlboro Lights from the lazy Beth in the middle of the table. 'Eleven o’clock.' She lit a cigarette. 'We’re packed with appointments today, but I’ll try to make it. Okay?' 'Okay,' Amy said. Beth worked at the Lakeview Mall at Fabulous You, a glamour photography store where they had makeup and clothes and got you all gussied up, then took

photographs that you could give to your husband or boyfriend. Beth spent forty hours a week making up stay-at-home spouses and teenagers in too much lipstick and the same evening gowns, posing them with an empty champagne glass as they gazed into the camera with their best come-hither look. It was a hard job, considering some of the raw material she had to work with; not everyone is cut out to be glamorous. She often said there was only so much of a miracle to be worked with concealer and creative lighting. Beth pushed her chair back, running a hand through her hair; she had Amy's face, round with deep green eyes,

and thick blonde hair she bleached every few months. She had bright red fingernails, smoked constantly, and owned more lingerie than Victoria’s Secret.

7

The first time I had met her, the day they moved in, Beth had been flirting with the movers, dressed in hip-huggers, a macramé halter top that showed her stomach, and heels at least four inches high. She was not like my mother; she was not like anyone’s mother. To me, she looked just like Barbie, and she had fascinated me ever since. 'Well,' Beth

drawled, standing up and ruffling Amy’s hair with her hand as she passed. 'Got to get ready for the salt mines. You girls call if you need me. Okay?' 'Okay,' Amy said, taking another mouthful of cereal. 'Bye, Beth,' I said. 'She won’t come,' Amy said once Beth was safely upstairs, her footsteps creaking above us. 'Why not?' 'Funerals freak her out.' She dropped her spoon in her bowl, finished. 'Beth has a convenient excuse for everything.' When we went upstairs to get ready, I flopped on the edge of her bed, which was covered in clothes and magazines and mismatched blankets and sheets. Amy opened her closet and stood in front of it

with her hands on her hips, contemplating. Beth yelled good-bye from downstairs and the front door slammed, followed by the sound of her car starting and backing out of the driveway. Through the window over Amy’s bed, I could see my mother sitting in the swing on our front porch, drinking coffee and reading the paper. As Beth drove past, she waved; her 'neighbor smile' on, and went back to reading. 'I hate this,' Amy said suddenly, reaching into the closet and pulling out a navy-blue dress with a white collar. 'I don’t have a single thing that’s appropriate.' 'You can wear my twelve-year-old dress,' I offered, and she made a

face. 'I bet Beth’s got something,' she said suddenly, leaving the room. Beth’s closet was a legend; she was a fashion plate and a packrat, the most dangerous of pairings. I reached over and turned on the radio next to the bed, leaning back and closing my eyes. I had spent half my life in Amy’s room, sprawled across the bed with a stack of Seventeen magazines between us, picking out future prom dresses and reading up on pimple prevention and boyfriend problems. Right next to her window was the shelf with her pictures: me and her at the beach two years ago, in matching sailor hats, doing a mock salute at my father’s camera. Beth at eighteen,

an old school picture, faded and creased. And finally, at the end and unframed, that same picture of her and Jack at the lake. Since I left for Sisterhood Camp, she had moved it, so it was within easy reach. I felt something pressing into my back, hard, and I reached under to move it; it was a boot with a thick sole that resisted when I pulled on it. I shifted my position and gave it another yank, wondering when Amy had bought hiking boots. I was about to yell out and ask her, when it suddenly yanked back, hard, and there was an explosion of movement on the bed, arms and legs flailing, things falling off the sides as someone rose out of the mess

around me, shaking off magazines and blankets and pillows in all directions.

-And- suddenly, I found myself face to face with Beth Faulkner. He glanced around the room as if he were not sure where he was. His blond hair, cut short over his ears, tuck up in tiny cowlicks. In one ear was a row of three silver hoops-ie. 'What?' He managed, sitting up straighter and blinking. He was all tangled up, one sheet wrapped around his arm. 'Where’s Amy?' 'She’s down there,' I said automatically, pointing toward the door, as if that was down, which it was not. He shook his head, trying to wake up. I would have been just

as shocked to see Beth in Amy’s bed; I had no idea she even knew Beth Faulkner. We all knew who he was, of course. had somehow landed in my lap, as a Boy with a Reputation, his neighborhood legend preceded him. And what was he doing in her bed, anyway? It could not mean no. She would have told me; she told me everything. And Beth had said Amy slept on the couch. 'Well, I think I can wear this,' I heard Amy say as she came back down the hallway, a black dress over her arm. She looked at Beth, then at me, and walked to the closet as if it were the most normal thing in the world to have a strange boy in your bed at

ten in the morning on a Thursday. Beth lay back, letting one hand flop over his eyes. His boot, and his foot in it, where it remained. Beth Faulkner’s foot was in my lap. 'Did you meet Hallie?' Amy asked him, hanging the dress on her closet door.

8

'Hallie, this is Beth. Beth, Hallie.' 'Hi,' I said immediately aware of how high my voice was. 'Hey.' He nodded at me, moving his foot off my lap as if that was nothing special, then got off the bed and stood up, stretching his arms. 'Man, I feel awful.' 'Well, you should,' Amy said in the same scolding voice she used with me

when I was especially spineless. 'You were incredibly wasted.' Beth leaned over and rooted around under the sheets, looking for something, while I sat there and stared at him. He was in a white T-shirt ripped along the hem, and dark blue shorts, those clunky boots on his feet. gathering it in her hands, which meant she was thinking. 'So, you need a ride to the service?' 'No,' he said, walking to the bedroom door with his hands in his pockets, stepping over my feet as if I was invisible. 'I'll see you there.' 'Okay.' He was tall and wiry, and tan from a summer working landscaping around the neighborhood, which was the only place I

ever saw him, and even then, from a distance. 'Have you seen-?' he began, but Amy was already reaching to the bedside table and the baseball cap lying there. Dan- leaned over and took it from her, then put it on with a sheepish look. 'Thanks.' 'You’re welcome.' Amy pulled her hair back behind her head, Amy stood by the doorway. 'Is it cool? To go out this way?' he was whispering, gesturing down the hall to Beth’s empty room. 'It’s fine.' He nodded, then stepped toward her awkwardly, leaning down to kiss her cheek. 'Thanks,' he said quietly, in a voice I was not supposed to hear. 'I mean it.' 'It’s no big deal,' Amy said, smiling up at

him, and we both watched him as he loped off, his boots clunking down the stairs and out the door.

When- I heard it swing shut, I walked to the window and leaned against the glass, waiting until he came out on the walk, squinting, and began those eighteen steps to the street. Across the street my mother looked up, folding her paper in her lap, watching too. 'I cannot believe you,' I said aloud, as Beth Faulkner passed the prickly bushes and turned left, headed out of Lakeview – Neighborhood of Friends. 'He was upset,' Amy said simply. 'Jack was his best friend.' 'But you never even told me you

knew him. And then I come up here and he’s in your bed.' 'I just knew him through Jack. He is messed up, Hallie. He’s got a lot of problems.' 'It’s so weird, though,' I said. 'I mean, that he was here.' 'Jack Herring.' Amy sighed load and hard like in all the girl's ears that were just her ways. Something was up, with her more than always. 'He just needed someone,' she said. 'That’s all.' I still had my eye on Beth Faulkner as he moved past the perfect houses of our neighborhood, seeming out of place among hissing sprinklers and thrown newspapers on a bright and shiny late summer morning. I could not say then what it was about him

that kept me there. But just as he was rounding the corner, disappearing, he turned around and lifted his hand, waving at me, as if he knew even without turning back that I would still be there in the window, watching him go away. 'What about him?' who- HIM- yours truly repeated. The camp leader rolled her eyes this time getting frustrated, thinking, I was sure, that this was no emergency. 'What about him?' she said. Amy Ansley has been my BFF for as long as I can recall. It is a girlie thing- that how we are… That is why I knew she was the BFF I could count on… when she entitled me at camp as just that, throughout the most

horrible week of my young freaking miserable pre-teen girl life, that something was so wrong with it all even before she said it was. Just by her speech on the phone I knew- I knew by the texts too, yet that was the sealed fate there. I identified this as fact now. 'It’s Jack,' she said quietly. Her words crackled over distance. The camp administrator, a young lady named Jodi with long hair and tube socks, come loose cantankerously beside me- she was. Now At camp- I am here- at this place- Ya! Like- be there- I am- theoretical to be Isolated from the Weights of Society to Recover Ourselves as Ladies. Otherwise, some crap like that-

We remain theoretical to get phone calls at this and that time. Not at twelve o'clock on a Monday, inspiring you out of your floppy camp bed, and smelly pillow- then the woods behind- and all that to like the outhouse- then to a room too glum for me to say what it really looks like- then a phone which considered deeply in your small hand. Him- 'He’s passed on.' Amy’s voice was uniform, flat as if she were declaiming development tables. I like- could hear jingling and wallowing in the far back.

'Lifeless?' The camp leader beheld dumbly, quickly with anxious movements, and then I revolved away

from her looking eyes into mine. 'In what way?' More splashing, and swiftly I apprehended she was washing dishes- a girl named Jacky in the far front. I was now there- Amy, always capable, would do housework during atomic warfare. 'A dirt bike accident… is how- I said like lost in the out-load thoughts- This afternoon. He got hit by a car on the Short summit.' I alleged. 'He’s dead?' yep- I repeated, and the room gives the impression of being very minor unexpectedly, overcrowded, and as the camp administrator put her arm around me, all cuddly- I trembled her off, marching away- not liking the mushy goo-goo crap. I in-visualized Amy at the

sink in limits and a tank-shirt, her hair dragged back, phone raised between her boob or lack of them between her shoulders. 'Oh, my God.' It was said. 'I know,' Amy whispered, and there was a great babbling noise as water whizzed down her sink down her paints- I look like I pee-ed. She was not crying… about that even if it was embarrassing to her- yet she said- 'got yah.' 'Hallie?' she said again, and I knew it was hard for her to even ask. She had never been the one who needed me all that much. 'Hold on,' I said to her in that dim room, the night it all began. We sat there on the line for what seemed like the lengthiest time, the

energetic in the background, the only noses. I wanted to crawl through the handset right then, dashing out on the other side in her kitchen, beside her.

Jack, a boy we had grown up with, a boy one of us had loved. Gone- bead- lost forgotten- soon. The paper said he died on impact, the bike a total loss. He was turning left onto Lovell Avenue from the summit when a manufacturer in a BMW hit him dead on, knocking him off the motorbike he had only had since June and sending him flying twenty-one feet. It was not his fault. Jack Beth was sixteen years old. I had never been good at friendships; I was too quiet, too mousy,

and tended to choose bossy, mean girls who pushed me around and sent me home crying to my mother. Lakeview, A Neighborhood of Fiends, was full of little fiend-ett-es on pink bicycles with Barbie carrying cases in their white or pinkie, flower-appliquéd baskets. I had never had a best friend. 'Hallie?' she said softly, suddenly. Lakeview, our neighborhood, spread-eagled across several streets and cul-de-sacs, bracketed only by wooden posts and hand-carved signs, lined in yellow paint: Welcome to Lakeview an area of Friends. 'Yes?' 'Can you come home now?' I observed out the window at the dark blackish, and the lake beyond,

the moon sparkling off it. It was the end of August, the end of summer, School started in one week; we would be juniors this year. One year some high-school students had gone around, and crossed out there in friends, leaving us a Neighborhood of friends, something my father found panic-stricken. It tickled him so much, my mother often wondered aloud if he had done it himself. 'I’m on my way at this moment.' She was sitting on the front steps of her new house, watching them cart furniture in, her elbows propped on her knees, chin in her hands, wearing heart-shaped sunglasses with white plastic frames. The first time I

saw Amy was the day she and her mother, Matron, moved in. I was sitting by my window- I was eleven or younger I would say- anyways. watching the movers, when I saw a girl just my age, with red hair and blue tennis shoes. And she completely ignored me as I came up her front walk, stood in the thrown shade of the awning, and waited for her to say something. Jack said- died at 9:59 p.m. on August 14th. They said- He was also the only boy Amy had ever absolutely loved.

9

We had known him since we were kids, as if we had known each other. The

other characteristic distinguishing of Lakeview was the new airport three miles away, which meant a constant stream of airplanes taking off and landing. My father loved this, too; he spent most evenings out on the back porch, looking up excitedly at the sky as the distant rumblings got louder and louder… nearer, closer, and handier, until the white noise of a plane would burst out overhead, lights blinking, seeming powerful and loud enough to sweep us all along with it. It drove our neighbor, Mr. Kramer, to high blood pressure, but my father reveled in it. To me, it was standard. I hardly stirred, even when I slept, as the

glass in my windows shook with the house. So-0 I walked up to this new girl, her dark glasses sending my own echoed back at me: 'Amy?' a female’s voice came from inside the screen door, sounding tired and flustered. 'What did I do with my checkbook?' The girl on the steps turned her head. 'On the kitchen counter,' she called out- in a stronger voice. 'In the box with the realtor’s stuff.' 'The box with… that' The voice came back, rough as if its owner were moving around. the realtor’s stuff, hum, honey- babe- I do not think it is here… white T-shirt, blue cut-off age 14 in butt- shorts girl said scuffed kids with pink socks. And I waited for her

to laugh at me or send me away or just ignore me as all the bigger girls did. Oh, wait. The girl turned back and looked at me slightly, shaking her head. 'Hey,' she said to me suddenly, just as I was planning to turn back and head home. 'My name’s Amy.' She nodded, 'I’m Hallie,' I said, I remember thinking for the first time how she seemed old for her age, older than me. And I got that familiar fiend-et-te pink-bicycle feeling. Here it is!' Yes… The lady sounded triumphant as if she had revealed the Northwest Way, which we’d just well-read about at the end of the school year. then picked up her purse, and leaving just enough space for

someone else about the same size, and scooted down a bit on the steps, brushing it off with her hand. facing my house. And then she looked at me and smiled, and I crossed that short expanse of summer grass and sat beside her, we did not talk right away, but that was okay; we had a whole lifetime of talking ahead of us. trying to sound as bold as she had. I had never had a friend with an unusual name; all the girls in my classes were Lisa’s and Timmy’s, Caroline’s, and Kimberly. 'I live over there.' And from that day on, nothing ever looked the same. I pointed across the path, right to my bedroom window. I just sat there with her, staring across the

street at my house, my garage, my father pushing the mower past the rosebushes. All the things I had spent my life learning by heart. Nonetheless now, I had Amy. It was from 2:17 am. 'You'll be back just in time for school,' she said, flipping through the brochure again. 'I have a job,' I told her, my final attempt at an excuse. Amy and I were both cashiers at martin Market, the grocery store at the mall down the street from our neighborhood. 'I can't just take two weeks off.' 'I just wanted to know if it was possible,' she said, more to my father than me, but he just shook his head mildly and kept eating. 'I knew she'd think of every

reason not to go.' 'Mr. Avery says it’s slow enough that he can get your shifts covered,' she said simply. 'You called Mr. Avery?' I put down my fork. 'Why should I go waste the last two weeks of summer with a bunch of people I don’t know?' I said. 'Amy and I have plans, Mom. We’re working extra shifts to make money for the beach, and we um…' My father, who up until this point had been eating quietly and staying out of it, shot her a look. Even he knew how uncool it was for your mother to call your boss. 'God, Mom' 'Hallie.' She was getting irritated now. 'Amy will be here when you get back. And I do not ask very much of you, right? This

is something I want you to do. For me, and I think you will find, for yourself. It’s only for two weeks.' 'I don’t want to go,' I said, looking at my father for support, but he juss-upport-getically and said nothing, helping himself to get more bread. He never got involved anymore; his job was to placate, to smooth, once it was all over. My father was always the one who crept to my doorway after I had been grounded, sneaking me into one of his special Branden Coffee Milkshakes, which he believed could solve any problem. After the yelling and slamming of doors, after my mother and I talked to our separate corners, I could always count on hearing

the whirring of the blender in the kitchen, and then him appearing at my doorway presenting me with the thickest, iciest milkshakes as a peace contribution. when I called. The minute- I hung up with Amy, I called my ma. She was a psychotherapist, an expert on teenage behavior. On the other hand, even with her two books, dozens of seminars, and appearances on local talk shows advising parents on how to handle The Difficult Years, my mother had not found the solution for dealing with me. 'Hello?'

Strangely, my mother sounded wide awake. It was all part of that professional manner she cultivated: I am

capable, I am strong. I am awake. 'The camp bureau,' I said. 'I need you to come to get me.' 'Get you?' she said. She sounded surprised. 'You've still got another week, Hallie.' My father saying Who is dead? Who? 'Jack,' I said. 'Oh, goodness.' She sighed, and I heard her telling my father to go back to sleep, her hand cupping the receiver. 'Honey, I know, it's horrible. It's late where are you calling from?' 'Mom?' 'Hallie? What's wrong?' There was some mumbling in the background; my father, moving. 'Honey, you're tired, it's late—' and now she was lapsing into her therapist's voice, a change I could recognize after all these

years 'why don’t you call me back tomorrow when you’ve had a chance to calm down. You don’t want to leave camp early.' 'My friend.' 'It’s Jack, Mommy.' 'Whom?' 'He’s dead.' 'Who’s dead?'

'Mom, he’s dead,' I said again. 'I know, sweetie. It is awful. Nonetheless coming home is not going to change that. It will just disrupt your summer, and there’s no point a-hhh.' 'Amy has her mother, Hallie. She will be fine. Honey, it is so late. Which was just what I had predicted when I was dragged off against my will to spend the last two weeks of summer in the middle of the mountains with a bunch of other girls who had no

say in the matter either. Sister making Camp, which was called Camp Believe (my father coined the nickname,) was something my mother had heard about at one of her seminars. She had come home with a brochure she tucked under my breakfast plate one morning, Are you with someone? Is your counselor there?' Every time I said- the word Jodi, the camp director who was still standing beside me, put on her soothing face. My throat was swelling up now, hurting with its ache. him- More mumbling, this time louder. 'I know, but I want to come home.'

10

'I want to come home,' I said, talking over her. I thought of Amy in her bright kitchen, waiting for me. This was decisive. She needs me… I took a deep breath, and all I could see in my mind was Jack, a boy I hardly knew, whose death now meant everything. 'I need to come home. Amy called to tell me. She did not understand. She never understood. 'Please,' I whispered over the line, hiding my face from Jodi, not wanting this strange woman to feel any sorrier for me. 'Please get me.' 'Hallie.' She announced tiredly now, almost annoyed.

'Just say you'll come. He was our friend, Mom.' 'Go to sleep now- and I'll

call you tomorrow. We can discuss it then.' 'Say you'll come,' I said… not good enough for her to hang up. She was quiet then, and I could picture her sitting in bed next to the sleeping form of my father, in her blue nightgown, the light from Amy's kitchen visible from the window over her shoulder. 'Oh, Hallie,' she said as if I always caused these kinds of problems; as if my friends died every day. 'All right then. I'll come 4- U.' 'You will?' 'I just said I would,' she told me, and I knew this would strain us even further, a battle hard-won. 'Let me talk to your counselor.' 'Okay.' I watched over at Jodi, who was close to dozing off nodding.

'Mommy?' 'Affirmative.' 'Thanks.' Hush… I would pay for this one for a while, I could tell. 'It’s all right. Let me talk to her.' I could not sleep for a long time. I thought only of Jack Beth’s face, the one I had cast sideways glances at through middle school, the one Amy and I had studied in yearbook after yearbook. Besides later, the one in the picture that was pushed in the mirror in her bedroom, of Amy and Jack at the lake just weeks earlier; water impressive behind them. So-o I handed the phone over to Jodi, then stood outside the door listening as she reassured my mother that it was fine, I would be packed and ready, and what a shame, how awful,

so young. Then I went back to my cabin, creeping onto my bed in the dark, and closed my eyes. The way her head rested on his shoulder, his hand on her knee. The way he looked at her, and not at the camera, when I pushed the red button, the flash lighting them up in front of me. My mother a yellow sticky notes on it saying What do you think? My first reaction was not much, thank you, as I stared down at the picture of two girls about my age running through a field together hand in hand. The basic gist was this: a camp with the usual swimming and horseback riding and lanyard making, but in the afternoon's seminars and self-help

groups on 'Like Mother, Like Me' and 'Noble Pressure: Where Do I Fit In?' There was a whole paragraph on self-esteem and values maintenance and other words I recognized only from the blurbs on the back of my mother’s books. All I knew was that at fifteen, with my driver’s license less than three months away, I was too old from camp or values maintenance, not to mention lanyards. did not look incredibly happy when she pulled up at the front office the next afternoon. It was clear by this point that my experience at Sister making Camp had been a complete and utter disaster. 'It will be such a valuable experience,' she

said to me that evening over dinner. 'Much more so than sitting around the pool at

Amy’s getting a tan and talking about boys.' 'Mom, it’s summer,' I said. 'And anyway, it’s almost over.

11

School starts in two weeks.' But all the milkshakes in the world were not going to get me out of this. So, just like that, I lost the end of my summer. By that Sunday I was packed and riding for three hours into the mountains with my mother, who spent the entire ride reminiscing about her golden camp years and

promising me I would thank her when it was over. She dropped me at the registration desk, kissed me on the forehead and told me she loved me, then drove off waving into the sunset. I stood there with my duffel bag and glowed after her, surrounded by a bunch of other girls who did not want to spend two weeks 'bonding' either. I was on what they called 'scholarship' at Sisterhood Camp, which meant I had my way paid free, just like the four other girls I met whose parents just happened to be therapists. I made friends with my cabin mates, also we complained to each other, mocked all the seminar leaders, and worked on our tans,

talking about boys. Nevertheless, now I was leaving early, drawn home by the loss of a boy I had hardly known. I put my stuff in the trunk of the car and climbed in beside my mother, who said hello and then not much else for the first fifteen minutes of the drive. As far as I was concerned, we had come to a draw: I had not wanted to come, and she did not want me to leave. We were even. But I knew my mother would not see it that way. Lately, we have not seemed to see anything the same. 'So how was it?' she asked me once we got on the High- Way. She had set the cruise control, adjusted the air conditioning, and now seem ready

to make peace. 'Or what you saw of it. 'It was ok,' I said. 'The seminars were kind of boring.' 'Hmm,' she said, and I figured that I was pushing it. I knew my mother, though. She would push back. 'Well, maybe if you'd stayed the whole time you might have gotten more out of it.' 'Maybe,' I said. In the side mirror, I could see the mountains retreating behind us, bit by bit. I knew there were a lot of things she wanted to say to me. She wanted to ask me why I cared about Jack Beth since she had hardly heard me mention him. Or else why I had hated the idea of camping right from the start, without even giving it a chance. Or it was

more, like why in just the last few months even the sight of her coming toward me was enough to get my guard up. Why had we gone from best friends to something neither of us could rightly define? But she did not say anything. She authored articles in journals and magazines about our successful relationship and how we had weathered my first year of high school together and spoke at schools and parenting about Staying in Touch with Your Teen. Whenever her friends came over for coffee and complained about their kids running wild or doing drugs, she would say. 'Hallie and I are just so close. We talk about everything.' 'Mom?'

She turned to look at me, and I could almost hear her take a breath, readying herself for whatever I might try next. 'Yes?' 'Thanks for letting me come home,' She turned back to the road. 'It’s all right, Hallie,' she said to me softly as I leaned back in my seat. 'It’s all right.' Mom- My mother and I had always been close. She knew everything about me, from the boys I liked to the girls I envied; after school, I always sat in the kitchen eating my snack and doing homework while

I listened for her car to pull up. while I detailed everything that had happened from the first song to last On Saturdays when my dad pulled morning

shift at the radio station, we had Girls' Lunch Out- so we could keep up with each other., and I only liked fast food and pizza, so we spaced out. She made me eat snails, and I watched her gulp down enjoying it more than she ever would acknowledge countless Big Macs. We had one rule: we always ordered two desserts and shared. Afterward, we hit the mall looking for sales, competing to see who could find the best bargain. She usually won. I always had something to tell her. After my first school dance, she sat with me eating ice cream out of the carton She loved fancy pasta places Each summer, my parents and I took a vacation. It was

our big splurge of the year, and we always went someplace cool like Mexico or Europe. This year, we took a cross-country road trip to California and then the Grand Canyon, making up songs and jokes- stopping here and there, sucking up the scenery and visiting relatives. My mother and I had a wonderful time; my and the two of us spent time together, father did most of the driving, talking, and listening to the radio, sharing clothes, as state lines and landmarks passed by My father, and I forced her to eat fast food every day as payback for a year’s worth of arugula salad and prosciutto tortellini. We spent two weeks together,

bickering sometimes but mostly just having fun, me and my parents on the road. three excessively important things happened as soon as I got home, though, First, I started my job at Milton's. But suddenly, at the beginning of that summer, something changed. I cannot say when it started exactly. But it happened after the Grand Canyon. Amy and I had spent the end of the school year going around filling out applications, and it was the only place with enough positions to hire us both. By the time I got home from the trip, Amy had already been there for two weeks, so she taught me the ropes. Second, she introduced me to Beth Tabor,

whom she had met at the pool while I had been gone.

Amy was a cheerleader with a wild streak a mile wide and a reputation among the football team for more than her cheers and famous mid-air splits. She lived a few miles away in the Arbors, a fancy development of Tudor houses with a country club She threw money at Beth and left us alone to prowl the streets of the Arbors on our way to the pool, or sneak out across the golf course at night to meet boys. Which, in turn, let to the third big event that summer, when two weeks after coming home I broke off my dull, one-year romance with Beth, pool,

and golf course. Tabor’s father was a dentist, and her mother weighed about eighty pounds, chain-smoked Benson and Privets 101’s, and had skin that was as leathery as the ottoman in our Livingroom. Beth was my first 'boyfriend,' which meant we called each other on the phone and kissed sometimes. He was tall and skinny, with thick black hair and a bit of acne. His parents were best friends of mine, and we had spent Friday night together, at our house or theirs, for most of my lifetime. He had been all right for a start. But when I was inducted into the new crazy world of Beth Tabor, he had to go. He did not take it well. He sulked

around, glowered at me, and still came over every Friday with his little sister and his parents, sitting stony-faced on the couch as I slipped out the door, yelling good-bye. She was standing by herself, her arms folded tightly across her chest. 'Amy?' I said. 'This was a bad idea,' she said. 'We shouldn’t have come.' 'But-' And that was as far as I got before Beth Tabor came up behind me, throwing her arms around both of us at once and collapsing into tears. She smelled like hairspray and cigarette smoke and was wearing a blue dress that showed way too much leg. 'Oh my God,' she said, lifting her head to take in me and then Amy as we pulled away

from her as delicately as possible. 'It’s so awful, so terrible. I have not been able to eat since I heard. I’m a wreck.' Neither of us said anything; we just kept walking, while Beth fumbled for a cigarette, lighting it, and then fanning the smoke with one hand. 'I mean, the time that we were together wasn’t all that great, but I loved him so much. It was just circumstances-' and now she sobbed, shaking her head 'that kept us apart. But he was, like, everything to me for those two months. Everything.' I looked over at Amy, who was studying the pavement, and I said, 'I’m so sorry Beth.' 'Well,' she said in a tight voice, exhaling a long

stream of smoke, 'it’s so different when you knew him well. You know?'

'I know,' I said. We had not seen much of Beth since midsummer. I always said I was going to Amy’s, but instead, we were usually meeting boys at the pool or hanging out with Beth. My mother was sadder about our breakup than anyone;

I think she had half expected I would marry him. But this was the New Me, someone I was evolving into with every hot and humid long summer day.

12

I learned to smoke cigarettes, drank my first beer, got a deep tan, and

double pierced my ears as I began to drift, imperceptibly at first, from my mother. When we got to the church, there was already a line out the door. Amy had not said much the entire trip, and as we walked over, she was wringing her hands. 'Are you okay?' I asked her. 'It’s simply weird,' she said, and her voice was low and hollow. She had her eyes on something straight ahead. 'All of it.' As I looked up I could see what she meant. Beth, head cheerleader, was surrounded by a group of her friends on the church steps. She was sobbing hysterically, a red T-shirt in her hands. Amy stopped when we got within a few feet of the crowd, so

suddenly that I kept walking and then had to go back for her. After spending a few wild weeks with us, she would get sent off to a combination cheerleading /Bible camp while her parents went to Europe. It was just as well, we figured. There was only so much of ongoing Beth you could take. A

few days later Amy had met Jack, and the second half of our summer began. We kept following the line into the church, now coming up on Beth. Beth, of course, made a big show of running over to her and bursting into fresh tears, and they stood and hugged each other, crying together.

'It’s so awful,' a girl said from behind me. 'He loved Beth so much. That is his shirt she is holding, you know. She hasn’t put it down since she heard.' 'I thought they broke up,' said another girl, and cracked her gum. 'At the beginning of the summertime. But he still loved her. Anyway, that Beth Tabor is so damn shallow,' said the first girl. 'She only dated him for about two days.' Once inside, we sat toward the back, next to two older women who pulled they are There is a picture on my mantel that always reminds me of what my mother and I were then. We are at the Grand Canyon, at one of those overlook sites,

with its spread out huge and gaping behind us. We have on matching T-shirts, sunglasses, and big smiles as we pose, arms around each other. We have never in any picture before or since looked more alike. We have the small nose, the same stance, the same silly smile. We look happy, standing there in the sunshine, the sky spread out blue and forever in the distance. My mother framed that picture when we got home, sticking it front and center on the mantel where you could not help but see it. It was like she knew, somehow, that it would be a relic just months later, proof of another time and place neither of us could imagine had

existed: my mother and me, best friends, posing at the Grand Canyon knees aside primly as we slid past them. Amy saw him first, walking alone up the street, his white dress shirt soaked and sticking to his back.

His head was ducked and he had his hands in his pockets, staring down at the pavement as people ran past with umbrellas. Amy beeped the horn, slowing beside him.

'Beth!' she called out, leaning into the shower. 'Hey, girl!'

He did not hear her, and she poked me. 'Yell out to him, Hallie.' 'What?'

'Roll down your window some- and ask him if he wants a ride.' 'Amy,' I said, suddenly nervous, 'I don’t even know him.' 'So what?' She gave me a look.

13

'It’s pouring. Hurry up.' I rolled my window down and stuck my head out, feeling the rain pelting the back of my neck. 'Excuse me,' I said. He did not hear me. I cleared my throat, stalling. 'Excuse me.' 'Hallie,' Amy said, glancing into the rearview mirror, 'we’re holding up traffic here. Come on.' 'He can’t hear me,' I said defensively. 'You’re practically whispering.' 'I am not,' I snapped. 'I am

speaking in a perfectly audible tone of voice.' 'Just yell it.' Cars were going around us now as a fresh wave of rain poured in my window, soaking my lap. Amy exhaled loudly, which meant she was losing patience. 'Come on, Hallie, don’t be such a wuss.' 'I am not a wuss,' I said. 'God.' She just looked at me. I stuck my head back out the window.

'Beth,' I said it a little louder this time, just because I was angry. 'Beth.' Another loud exhalation from Amy. I was getting completely soaked. 'Beth,' I said a bit louder, stretching my head completely out of the car. 'Beth!' He jerked suddenly on the sidewalk, turning around, and

looking at me as if he expected us to come flying up the curb in our tiny car to squash him completely. Then he just stared, his shirt soaked and sticking to his skin, his hair dripping onto his face, stood, and stared at me as if I were completely and completely nuts. 'What?' he screamed back, just as loudly, 'What is it?' Beside me, Amy burst out laughing, the first time I had heard her laugh since I had come home. She leaned back in her seat, hand over her mouth, giggling uncontrollably. I wanted to die. 'Um,' I said, and he was still staring at me. 'Do you want a ride?' 'I’m okay,' he said across me, to Amy. 'But thanks.' 'Beth, it’s

pouring.' She had her mom's voice on, one I recognized. As he looked across me, I could see how red his eyes were, swollen from crying. 'Come on.' 'I’m okay,' he said again, backing off from the car. He wiped his hand over his face and hair, water spraying everywhere. 'I’ll see you later.'

14

'Beth,' she called out again, but he was already gone, walking back into the rain. As we sat at the stoplight, he cut around a corner and disappeared; the last thing I saw was his shirt, a flash of white against the brick of the alley. Then he was

gone, vanishing so easily it seemed like magic – there was no trace. Amy sighed as I rolled up my window, saying something about everybody having their ways. I was only watching the alleyway, the last place I had seen him, wondering if he had ever been there at all. Up at the front of the church, there were two posters with pictures of Jack taped to them: baby snapshots, school pictures, candid is I recognized from the yearbook. And in the middle, biggest of all, was the picture from the slideshow, the one that had brought cheers in that darkened auditorium in June. I wanted to point it out to Amy, but when I turned to tell her,

she was just staring at the back of the pew in front of us, her face pale, and I kept quiet. The service started late, with people filing in and lining the walls, shuffling, and fanning themselves with the little paper programs we Hadad been handed at the door. Beth Gunderson came in, still crying, and was led to a seat with Beth Tabor sobbing right behind her. It was strange to see my generations in this setting; some were dressed up nicely, obviously used to wearing church clothes. Others looked out of place, awkward, tugging at their ties or dress shirts. I wondered what Jack was thinking, looking down at all these people with red faces

shifting in their seats, at the wailing girls he left behind, at his parents in the front pew with his little sister, quietly stoic and sad. And I looked over at Amy, who had loved him so much in such a brief time, and slipped my hand around hers, squeezing it. She squeezed back, still staring ahead. The service was formal and short; the heat was stifling with all the people packed in so tightly, and we could barely hear the minister over the fanning and the creaking of the pews. He talked about Jack, and what he meant to so many persons; he said something about God having his reasons. Beth got up and left ten minutes into it, her hand pressed

against her mouth as she walked quickly down the aisle of the church, a gaggle of friends running behind her. The older women next to us shook their heads, disapproving, and Amy squeezed my hand harder, her fingernails digging into my skin. When the service was over, there was an awkward murmur of voices as everyone filed outside. It had suddenly gotten very dark, with a strange breeze blowing that smelled like rain.

Overhead the clouds had piled up big and murky behind the trees. I almost lost Amy in the crowd of voices and faces and color in front of the church. Beth was leaning on Brett Hershey, the captain of

the football team, as he led her out. Beth was sitting in the front seat of a car in the parking lot, the door open, her head in her hands. Everyone else stood around uncertainly as if they needed permission to leave, holding their programs and looking up at the sky. 'Poor sweet Beth,' Amy said tenderly as we stood by her car. 'They broke up a while ago,' I said. 'Yes. They did.' She kicked a stone, and it rattled off something under the car. 'But he loved her.' I looked over at her, the wind blowing her hair around her face, her fair skin so white against the black of Beth’s dress. The times I caught her unaware, accidentally, were when she

was the most beautiful. She looked up at the sky, black with clouds, the smell of rain stronger and stronger. 'I know,' she said softly. 'I know.' The first drop was big, sloshy, and wet, falling on my shoulder and leaving around a dark circle. Then, suddenly, it was pouring. The rain came in sheets, sending people running toward their cars, shielding themselves with their flimsy paper programs. Amy and I dove into her car and watched the water stream down the windshield. I could not remember the last time I had seen it rain so hard. We pulled out onto Main Street in Amy’s Ford Aspire. Her grandmother had given it to her for her

birthday in April. It was about the size of a shoebox; it looked like a larger car that had been cut in half with a big bread knife. As we crossed a river of water spilling into the road, I wondered briefly if we would get pulled into the current and carried away like cattle, and Nod in their big shoe, out to sea. 'He loved you, too,' I told her.